Top 10 Tips for Observing Wildlife

Yes, plants tend to be the easiest to observe of all the life forms out there, but even easy observations require attention paid to detail. The following list lays out some tips and good advice for locating and observing various organisms common in our area:

1. **Trees and shrubs** | When observing trees and shrubs, try to take: a photo of the whole organism (or as much of it as you can fit into the frame); a close-up of its bark; a close-up of a branch in which leaves, flowers and fruits are clearly visible. If the undersides of leaves are unusually colored or textured, photograph those too.
2. **Non-woody plants** | When observing non-woody plants (including yard weeds, grasses, and wildflowers), try to take: a photo of the whole organism, preferably with a ruler or other size reference visible; a close-up of either leaves or flowers (preferably both); a close-up of the stem, if it's visible. It's often helpful to note whether any parts of the plant are hairy or prickly in your observation.
3. **Mosses or lichen** | When observing mosses or lichen, take at least one photo at enough of a distance that the surface upon which it is growing is clear, and one close-up so that the structure is clearly visible.
4. **Soil organisms** | Carefully turn up stones or rotting logs to observe soil organisms. It's sometimes best to partner with someone when you do this, as critters flee when exposed to light. Have one partner turn up the log or landscape stone while the other takes photos. Always replace the log or stone when you're done.
5. **Insects** | Visit porchlights in the evenings to observe moths and night-flying insects. Experiment with using flash to take the photos; depending on your camera, the porchlight alone may be too dim to make details distinct. Examine plant leaves and bark for evidence of insect activity. Examples include twisting tunnels under bark or inside leaves, leaves that have been partially eaten, galls on branches, holes bored into bark, or webbing. Observations of these kinds of evidence are often identifiable even if the insect itself is not visible. Depending on how warm the season has been, you may be able to record crickets in the evening. Try to get close enough to a cricket that its song is clear above other ambient noise.
6. **Birds** | Go out early in the morning and try to record birdsong. Follow a song you hear to find its singer, and get close enough so that its song is clearer above any other birds singing nearby. Photos of birds taken at a distance are usually identifiable when coupled with a recording of their song. Take photos of evidence of birds, including footprints, droppings, and feathers. You can photograph nests and eggshells, but be careful not to disturb parent birds that are raising young. If it's clear a nest is in active use, document from a distance.
7. **Mammals** | Look for evidence of mammal activity, including discarded nutshells and fruits, footprints, and droppings/scat. (NOTE: Feral dogs and cats are fair game for observations, but please report them to your local Animal Control. If you see strays with collars, don't observe them; try to connect them with their owners.)
8. **Amphibians** | Go out in the evening during the breeding season (February to August) and try to record frog and toad calls. Look for tadpoles or clusters of eggs in shallow pools. Include photos showing the entire body, head, and tail of tadpoles.
9. **Reptiles** | Look for reptiles sunning themselves on warm surfaces, like rocks. Use caution! Photograph from a distance by using the zoom feature on your smartphone to get close-ups. Try to capture a good photo of the head and body.
10. **Practice caution and care.** | Step lightly, speak softly, and respect all life forms. If you need to gently move items to get a better shot, do so carefully, but leave everything as you originally found it.